

## The Turkish Time Machine: The Resurfacing Turkish-Kurdish Question and its Regional Impact

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Arbeitspapier / working paper

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Brakel, K. (2016). *The Turkish Time Machine: The Resurfacing Turkish-Kurdish Question and its Regional Impact*. (DGAP kompakt, 12). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-54238-4>

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## The Turkish Time Machine

# The Resurfacing Turkish-Kurdish Question and its Regional Impact

*Kristian Brakel*

The bomb that went off in downtown Ankara on March 13, killing 37 people, was a stark reminder that war has returned to Turkey. The second such attack within one month, it clearly shows that the conflict has the capacity to engulf all of Turkey. With the peace process in a shambles and the violent spillover from Syria intensifying, the resurgence of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict almost makes it seem as if the country has traveled back in time to the height of the civil war in the 1990s.

### A Return to the Past

The last eight months have seen a resumption of violent clashes in southeastern Turkey between Turkish security forces and Kurdish armed groups. While initial analysis suggested that a return to the peace process might be possible in the mid term, the current escalation in violence, rhetoric, and regional dynamics makes a quick fix highly unlikely. What many believe began as an extension of the election campaign of Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) has now turned into a situation that starkly resembles the dark days of Turkey's civil war in the early 1990s.

At that time, as war raged through Turkey's Kurdish-dominated areas, both the Kurdish resistance movement – the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – and the Turkish state employed a strategy of repression and counter violence, both of which left the civilian population as the main victims. At least forty thousand people died, thousands were internally displaced through the Turkish state's scorched-earth policy, and many people simply disappeared. Turkey's current prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, evoked this time at an election rally last October, saying that it was his party, the AKP, that had managed to overcome the ominous era when "white Toros" were seen in the streets. (He was referring to the Renault

12s driven by the state's infamous JITEM intelligence agency, which came to symbolize a state that killed and "disappeared" its own citizens.) It is also true, however, that it was the AKP's hard-line nationalist policy that recently enlisted the state's security apparatus to once again conduct an open war against the PKK.

The state had pursued negotiations with the PKK in different formats since 2009, and some advances were made on cultural rights such as the right to speak and teach Kurdish. Little progress was made on hard topics such as partial autonomy, however, and negotiations were marred by both a lack of formal structure and of a time line, as well as by the power asymmetries between the parties. The AKP had initially hoped to win Kurdish voters by promising reforms, economic investment, and partial autonomy. Relations deteriorated rapidly in late 2014, however, with the violent spillover of the Syrian war in the Syrian-Kurdish town of Kobani, which PKK and PYD fighters had successfully defended under US air cover against forces of the Islamic State (ISIS).

The peace process began to break down as the pro-Kurdish, leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) aban-

doned its position to support the bid of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to transform Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one. A framework agreement (the Dolmabahçe Agreement) signed in February 2015 as a last attempt by both sides to salvage the process was quickly disavowed by both the Turkish president and PKK hardliners. On June 11, 2015 the PKK announced an end to its ninth unilateral ceasefire, arguing that the government had used the lull in fighting to establish tighter security control in the region. On June 24, after a PKK-aligned group killed two police officers, the state started aerial bombardments against PKK positions in northern Iraq, where the PKK has its military headquarters in the Qandil mountain ridge. The PKK mobilized its armed youth wing, the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), which erected barricades and dug mined trenches in several Turkish cities in the southeast.

The AKP, driven by its will to win back the absolute majority that it had lost in the June parliamentary elections –

due to the high turnout in support of the pro-Kurdish HDP (13 percent) – started a violent and ongoing campaign criminalizing HDP party leaders and supporters for their alleged links to the PKK. After early elections last November swept the AKP back into power with a single-party majority, the government vowed that it would never abandon the peace process, while at the same time intensifying the campaign of arrests and military violence against the PKK and its supporters.

The Ankara bombing of March 13, 2016 signals that the conflict is now coming to the western part of the country. The group that seems to be behind the attack claims it operates independently of the PKK, but the Turkish government nonetheless considers it a PKK subsidiary. This has the potential to escalate further. Certainly, both the government and the PKK now state plainly that there is no going back to the peace process as it once was.

## Who's Who in Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan

**PKK** (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or Kurdistan Workers' Party): Founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978 with the goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state, the PKK has meanwhile changed its political goals and brought forth a myriad of other organizations, not only in Turkey but also in the neighboring countries of Iran, Iraq, and Syria and within the European diaspora. According to ideological guidelines, the PKK has given up the demand for a Kurdish state and now seeks to establish what Öcalan calls "Democratic Confederalism" – a sort of Soviet republic under one-party rule in which all citizens would be included in decision making for their local communities through grass-roots democracy. Such an order is foreseen as transcending parliamentary democracy as well as the nation state while addressing democracy deficits for the whole population of the respective countries.

**KCK** (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, or Group of Communities in Kurdistan): The KCK acts as the umbrella structure of all PKK-affiliated organizations, be they military or civil (such as NGOs, labor unions, and political parties).

**PYD** (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, or Democratic Union Party): Established in 2003, the PYD is the KCK's party in Syria. It is led by Salih Muslim. The PYD adheres to the same ideology as the PKK and coordinates closely with the KCK leadership. Initially tolerated by the Assad regime as a way to control the Kurdish "masses," the PYD came under pressure when Syrian-Turkish relations warmed after 2007. When the Syrian uprising started in 2011, however, the PYD struck a deal with the Assad regime that guaranteed it quasi-autonomy in the north of the country in exchange for not taking part in the fight against the regime and for suppressing protest. The PYD used its armed wing, the YPG/YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, or Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units), to secure the area and later aligned with Arab Sunni groups and others loyal to the regime, which now form the Syrian Democratic Forces.

**HDP** (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, or Peoples' Democratic Party): An alliance of Turkish and Kurdish left parties, that managed to clear the threshold for representation in Turkish parliament, garnering 13.1 percent of the vote in the June 2015 election. In the snap elections of November 2015 it fell back to 10.7 percent. The party is led by two co-chairs: Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. The party adheres to the revised PKK ideology of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan: that the Kurdish issue can only be solved within a more democratic Turkey.

## How Kurdish Success in Syria Stymies Kurdish Peace in Turkey

The reasons for the foundering peace process are to be found both in Turkey and in Syria, where the interests of the PKK and of the Turkish government are most sharply at odds. With the Syrian-Russian offensive in northern Syria intensifying since January 2016, Kurdish forces – under the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – have emerged as the most important power broker, able to exert massive influence over the future course of the Syrian war. This newly won strength has violent repercussions for the Kurdish population within Turkey, however.

Both the Turkish government and the PKK know – in theory – that this conflict cannot be won militarily. There has been no lack of trying during the last twenty years. When the AKP first came to power in 2002, Erdogan's party viewed the repression of the Kurds as part of the same repressive state structure that had also targeted its own Islamist predecessors. Indeed, its initial willingness to transcend the ethnic Turkish-Kurdish divide was what secured the AKP a big constituency among conservative Kurdish voters, a constituency that has by now been starkly diminished. The AKP understood the Kurdish problem mainly as an economic one. It invested heavily in areas that had long been economically marginalized, and in doing so secured support especially from the newly strengthened Kurdish middle class.

As the AKP's foot-dragging in the official peace talks became more and more evident, however, Kurdish voters turned away from the party. Kurdish votes for the AKP never again reached the one-time high of the initial 2002 elections. Particularly in the summer election of 2015 that cost the AKP its majority and propelled the HDP into the national parliament, Kurdish voters made it clear that they had lost all trust. It seemed as if the Turkish government could never fully decide if it wanted to conclude the peace process in earnest – and, in doing so, win the Kurds' allegiance – or if it preferred to pander to the strong Turkish nationalist undercurrent that existed even within the AKP and for whom any concessions to the PKK amounted to treason.

It was regional developments across the Syrian and Iraqi borders that finally drove the relationship to its nadir. PKK-aligned forces from the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) took the strategically important border town of Tal Abyad in June 2015. From this position they came closer than ever to advancing their positions across the Euphrates river and thereby closing the gap that existed between their three (now four) can-

tons in northern Syria, guaranteeing them a contiguous territory. For the Turkish government, this not only meant that the YPG would control the complete border region. It also meant losing the last border crossing – Bab as-Salameh/Öncüpinar – which was a vital supply route to the northern Syrian city of Aleppo for Turkey's own allies among the Syrian rebels, including the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition (the Army of Conquest).

The PKK, buoyed by victory, was not willing to bow to Turkish demands that it give up its military positions in Tal Abyad. Ankara had tried to bargain with the Syrian-Kurdish leader Salih Muslim, who was invited several times to Ankara, hoping that it could pry the PYD away from the PKK and persuade it not to cross the Euphrates, but to no avail. The movement was now in a better position than ever. Kurds had taken substantial steps to self-rule in northern Syria and had strengthened their position in northern Iraq. They had also, significantly, burnished their international image by fighting ISIS. For its part, the PKK in Turkey had used the years of relative quiet in Turkish Kurdistan to work toward a proto-state, establishing itself firmly through various means.

## The Return of the White Toros?

Whoever comes today to the city of Diyarbakir (Amed, in Kurmanji-Kurdish) will find both municipal structures and a society for which Kurdish autonomy is not a distant dream but a manifest destiny. Diyarbakir is not only the most important Kurdish city in Turkey's southeast; it is also the secret capital of northern Kurdistan, the region the Kurds call Bakur. Over the last twenty years the Kurdish movement has reached an unprecedented level of cohesion among the Kurdish population. It spans far beyond purely military structures such as the PKK and its armed wing, the People's Defense Forces (HPG). Most segments of society, from the HDP-dominated municipalities to civil society organizations, see themselves as part of the would-be Kurdish state. In such a system, the Turkish state, which is represented through a governor appointed by Ankara and the much-hated security forces, serve as a reminder of the state's oppressive relationship with its Kurdish citizens.

Even for the younger generation of Kurds who do not remember the 1990s and its massive military operations, the state has now ensured that they see their future in a Kurdish solution – one with no or relatively diminished relations with the Turkish central state. Because, while the prime minister may claim that the dark days of state sponsored violence are over, many Kurds have a very

different impression. Most of them have a relatively clear-eyed understanding of what the state is willing to do to keep them in check.

Turkish security forces have in recent operations displayed the very attitudes that the prime minister claimed belong to the past. Time and again footage surfaces of security forces dragging the bodies of killed militants through the streets; there are photographs on which soldiers pose above the bodies of naked Kurdish female fighters. Security forces spray demeaning graffiti on houses, or label entire town populations as traitors. Civilians and journalists have been targeted, even when they carry white flags. Turkish forces lacking the proper training and equipment for urban warfare are using tanks and artillery to shell entire city quarters, driving up the civilian death toll.

Dubious legal charges – such as the offense of “supporting a terrorist group without being a member” – open the door to excessive arrests and legal action. While press freedom is already limited in Turkey, the government has reached new lows in trying to bully journalists, talk show hosts, and others into sticking to the official narrative of what is going on in the southeast. Accordingly, for many Turks who live in other parts of the vast country, the conflict has – until the recent terror attacks – been very distant indeed. And while the government claims that it is fighting against “terrorists,” the civilian Kurdish population bears the brunt of the violence while security forces operate with de facto impunity.

## Economic Modernization as Cure-All

In a February 2016 speech in the southeastern city of Mardin, Prime Minister Davutoglu announced a ten-point plan to fight terror and reanimate some sort of peace process. One of the points he mentioned was tackling impunity among security forces. Given, however, that human rights organizations are reporting government obstructionism in legal proceedings against former security officials accused of crimes committed in the 1990s, the state’s commitment to holding security forces accountable for such actions is questionable at best.

The approach outlined by the prime minister also clearly shows that the government either fails to understand the main grievances of the Kurdish population or is unwilling to address them due to nationalist sentiment in the rest of the country. The plan makes clear that the government intends to sideline the PKK by addressing the public directly, initiating a consultation process over the constitution.

The key components of the plan are massive economic investments and incentives, large-scale urban renewal

projects, and democratic reforms through an overhaul of the constitution. The Turkish government would not be the first to create a peace process with a propped-up movement or “the people” instead of negotiating with a partner it dislikes. In this scenario, the government would try to win over key leaders in Kurdish communities, some of which were already close to the AKP before 2014, and offer some concessions to the Kurds.

Some initial promises have already been made, for example, that Kurdish cities will be allowed again to officially use their original Kurdish names. While such symbols will have a positive impact, they are not enough. These strategies are born out of an analysis that fails to understand how deeply engrained Kurdish aspirations have become.

The AKP doctrine of economic modernization as a cure-all is very present in Davutoglu’s speech, where he details various economic incentives the government will offer to Kurdish areas. The government is willing to make concessions on the cultural front but refuses to discuss any form of autonomy or self-rule that goes beyond loosening administrative and financial concentration.

What the Kurds want, however, is true decision-making power, and PKK cadres see this as a means of entrenching themselves further in the region. The government believes that Kurdish support for the PKK is mainly the result of pressure the group exerts on the population – in other words, of strong-arm tactics. While it is true that the PKK does have a record of coercing and suppressing civil society and those who stand against it, however, the government also underestimates the genuine public support the movement receives, simply for the fact that it is seen as the only capable defender of Kurdish rights in the face of state brutality.

The government rightly takes issue with the fact that the PKK has used the lull in fighting to build up a new militia: the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H). The PKK claims that it does not fully control YDG-H units and that these consist of disenfranchised youth who have taken to the streets on their own steam. Previous statements by the PKK, however, point to the fact that the YDG-H was established under its command.

Moreover, the statute of the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK) actually lists it explicitly as a member organization. It seems clear that the PKK has trained and equipped the youth group, and if there was no full control from the central command structures, this was likely deliberate. In an apparent move to rectify this and organize more fighting power, the YDG-H was merged in December 2015 with HPG units into the Civil Defense Units (YPS), bringing them under tighter PKK control.

The government has made it a precondition for any negotiations that the PKK lay down its arms. This is a hard-line position, one it knows the PKK will never be able to fulfill under the current military escalation. It is, however, failing to take into account how this will play out on the international stage.

## The Syria Conundrum

While both the US and the EU pay lip service to Turkey's right to fight the PKK as a terrorist group, this fight is no longer about Turkey. It is about the role the Kurds and especially the PKK play in the entire region. The Kurdish PYD in Syria has now openly aligned itself with Russia and is at least partially coordinating with the Assad regime to fight Turkey's proxy rebel forces in Syria. The US, however, is nowhere closer to dropping the YPG as a tactical ally, and the Kurds in Syria may very well be the force that holds the key to the future of the Assad regime. Within Europe, sympathy for the Kurds – and even for the PKK – is growing as the fight against ISIS stays in the headlines.

Turkey, afraid to lose its foothold in Syria, is shelling the YPG but without seriously impeding its advances. Ankara's current strategy of degrading the PKK's military abilities within Turkey will likely not be successful either. (It should be noted that the PKK has long shifted its priority to Syria, an area in which the Turkish air force dares not venture lest it become a target for the Russians.)

Finally, any Turkish peace process that sidelines the PKK would not only lack credibility but also leave the main issues unaddressed, as the PKK will continue to bear arms within Turkey. Such a process is unlikely to produce the desired outcome. Moreover, Kurdish voters in Turkey did not return to Erdogan's AKP party during the recent elections, or at least not in large enough numbers. This makes it very unlikely that the AKP government would benefit politically from any concessions it makes to the Kurds.

But while the PKK is in a strategically better position in Syria, its fight in Turkey is not without problems. Not only are many Kurds unhappy with the fact that the PKK has brought its fight to the urban centers, with the state's harsh countermeasures heavily affecting the civilian population. Such fighting has also shown that the same urban warfare tactics that proved to be successful against ISIS in Kobani are now seriously limiting the PKK in Turkey, for Turkish forces have a completely different arsenal at their disposal. While there is talk among Turkish Kurds that, come spring, more experienced PKK forces will come

down from the mountains, this would only make the fight bloodier; the state would likewise step up its response.

Signs of this escalation are surely the two recent bomb attacks in the heart of Ankara on February 17 and March 13. While the first one, committed by a PKK splinter group, targeted soldiers, the second one killed mostly civilians, something the PKK has not done since the mid-1990s. If this attack did indeed spring from a new strategy, then it might very well cost the PKK much of the sympathy the YPG/J had garnered over the last two years in its fight against ISIS.

In meetings, state officials, AKP members, and representatives on the Kurdish side have now entrenched their positions and have very little space to maneuver politically. Lower ranks on both sides parrot the line coming from their respective headquarters, even while it is sometimes privately acknowledged that the situation is more complex than the official narrative allows. Meanwhile the fighting – and the AKP's pandering to nationalistic voters – means that the overall societal climate in Turkey is changing.

After the second Ankara attack, President Erdogan called for a broader definition of terrorism to include journalists, academics, and politicians. He was clearly targeting the pro-Kurdish party HDP, and a process to strip the party leadership of its parliamentary immunity has been initiated. Orchestrated attacks on HDP offices in September 2015, as well as Turkish nationalist mobs attacking Kurds and Kurdish businesses throughout the country, have helped polarize the political atmosphere even further.

The November election results showed that first-time voters were most likely to support the Kurdish HDP and the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – the parties that embody the strongest Kurdish and Turkish nationalism. Young people especially are not only radicalizing but also losing hope that a peaceful solution is possible. With Turkey's foreign policy becoming ever more desperate and lacking options, the state will continue on its current path. The same is true for the PKK, which has strategically bound its fate to Russia's Syria policy, hoping that Russia can deliver what the West has denied it for decades.

## Is there Hope for the Peace Process?

A return to the peace process is possible in theory, but it would only serve to manage the conflict and allow for an extended ceasefire again. Incentives to do so, however, are currently small; hypercharged rhetoric and a lack of



international pressure make it unlikely. Moreover, Turkey would have to accept that it can no longer control the process from a position of strength. Bringing in a third-party mediator is something the Kurdish side has desired for a long time and which would actually make sense. It would, however, also need to include the PYD in the process or at least extract guarantees from it.

Apart from the US and Russia, there are currently few players capable of filling this mediating role and even fewer who would be willing to do so. To at least limit the effects of civil war on the civilian population and therefore also decrease the radicalization potential among Turkey's Kurds, bringing international observers

to the country's southeast would make sense. Either the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the International Committee of the Red Cross could play such an impartial role, but it would have to be the Turkish government that opens the door for them and accepts greater international scrutiny. This is an important step the international community – and especially the EU and the US – should push for, if one wants to keep Turkey from travelling back in time to its bloody past.

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